

Sokoro Sakara: A Contextual and Gender Analysis of Some Offensive Yoruba Proverbial Songs.¹

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Abstract

This paper examines the use of offensive Yoruba proverbial songs and how these songs reflect on gender construct as expressed in Olatubosun Oladapo's latest *ewi* (chanted poetry) album titled *Sokoro* which is an example of dialogic offensive proverbial songs. The study of Oladapo's musical *ewi* rendition shows that classification of Yoruba proverbial songs (*orin owe*), and by extension Yoruba proverbs in general, by sexes is possible. Relevant songs were selectively picked from Oladapo's album for analysis and interpretation. The analysis in this paper shows that contextual applications of these songs have some cultural implications which are found unique to Yoruba traditional experience. The paper further reveals that contrary to the general belief that women are more adept in using abusive songs, men could also be prolific in matching women's ingenuity on the direct use of abusive proverbial songs.

Introduction

Proverbs and gender are fundamental academic subjects of discourse throughout the world. On one hand, every society of the globe has its own proverbs. Though the use of proverbs may differ from society to society what is common to proverbs everywhere is that they touch on a wide a range of human concerns and activities. Most often proverbs are used not only to reflect on established norms and ethics but also as a means to bring back to memory past events and historic happenings concerning peoples, images and characters of periods and epochs. Among the Yoruba, proverbs and maxims are traditionally frequently used to teach moral and honourable behaviours known by the people as *iwa omoluabi*. This may be in the form of a (an) corrective, didactic, abusive or even eulogistic measure. Whichever way proverbs are used among the people, there is always a message to be passed across and a lesson to be learnt. Proverbs among the Yoruba are wisdom lore of every moment either in times of peace or in times of war. That is why it is required of every Yoruba person to be versed in the use and understanding of proverbs. It is believed that only the wise is able to use and understand

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proverbs in conversations and dialogues and that those who are versed in proverbs are usually good orators.

Discourses on gender also occupy a central place in contemporary scholarship. Unlike sex which is biologically defined, gender is socially constructed and has changing variables. Gender refers to the social relationships between men and women and the way those relationships are made by society. It can also be described as the division of society into biological, occupational and social roles. Such roles include reproductive, productive, community management, politics, and other domestic and civic life participation (Aina: 2006). Gender construct among the Yoruba is, similar to what is obtainable in most traditional societies in Africa. In a patriarchy obsessed society like the Yoruba, women are regarded as “weaker vessels” although when it comes to the realm of spiritual powers they are regarded and esteemed as the owner of the world (*awon iya alaye*). This is because of the general belief that they possessed superior clairvoyant and spiritual powers. . It is pertinent to say then that the concept of “weaker vessel” is only applicable to physical ability and strength. This again may be subjective, in actual fact, some women are even stronger than men though the percentage may be insignificant. , According to Ogunjipe (2002), if the essence of power or strength is the ability to get what one wants, then women cannot be reasonably referred to as weaker vessels.

In a typical Yoruba traditional setting particularly during quarrels and the attendant altercations between husbands and wives or among feuding parties abusive proverbial songs usually flow freely most especially from the women. Sometimes, the men who also have some singing skills do match such women with retaliatory proverbial songs. It is believed from the point of view of a Yoruba proverb that when there is a quarrel or rancour, songs usually become proverbs *ija lo de lorin d'ow*”.. These songs most of the time become the template by which gender chauvinism is expressed. Thus, the selection of songs for this discourse is based on the relevance of the selected songs to the hypothesis of the discourse. Olatunji (1984) categorises the use of proverbial songs into two contexts, the first context is when proverbs are used as statements, and the second context is when statements are used as proverbs. Sometimes, the characteristics of these

songs may not reckon with that of proverbs but their cultural implications and contextual applications usually agree with them. This paper situated within the above framework.

SOKORO AND SAKARA: A GENDER REFLEX AND MUSICAL DIALOGUE

. Tunbosun Oladapo has been one of the foremost Yoruba philosopher poets since the late seventies. His ingenuity as a prolific poet has earned him both national and international recognition .

The words “*sokoro*” and “*sakara*” as used in the title of his latest album are coined to interpret or explain the offensive or abusive retaliatory proverbial songs of men and women. . The two words are used here to dichotomize the proverbial dialogue between the male and female singers that represent these characters in the musical rendition. That is, “*sokoro*” is used to characterize the female gender while “*sakara*” stands for the male gender. The two words are two sides of the same coin and the whole of the musical rendition and the proverbs used in it reflect on these categorizations.

The dialogue in “*sokoro*” is a mimicry of the kind of real dialogue that may ensue between a quarrelsome husband and his nagging wife in a Yoruba traditional setting . The use of some components of Yoruba orature makes the presentation of this episode of Oladapo’s ewi a very interesting one. It also makes the understanding of the genre more accurate. According to Ilesanmi (2004), no one can read the mind of the oral artist; it is only he who can by vocalization make known to the audience what he stores in his mind. The motive behind Oladapo’s album is among other things to teach cultural ethics, morals and other aspect of Yoruba traditions.

Also noticed in the dialogue is Oladapo’s deliberate attempt to discourage matrimonial rancour and to show that even when it happens, because the Yoruba believes that “*a kii ri aremaja, a kii si i ri ajamare*” that is, “there in nothing like friends who never quarrel and enemies who cannot reconcile”, the real peace and settlement needed would only come when one of the couple honestly initiate it.

The exchange of offensive proverbial songs between the *sokoro* female singer and the *sakara* male singer in the work under discussion is usually in the form of call and response or action and reaction. As far as Oladapo’s chanted poetry is concerned, a few examples will suffice at this juncture.

(Action): Sokoro: *Loni ni n o f'ale mi han oko o*
Loni ni n o f'ale mi han oko
Oko ti o toju mi lakoko
Loni ni n o f'ale mi han oko

Meaning I will show my concubine to my husband today
 I will show my concubine to my husband today
 A husband that is very uncaring
 I will show my concubine to my husband today

The above song reflects on two important things. One, in Yoruba traditional society, it is the responsibility of the husband to provide the basic needs for his family irrespective of the status of the wife. Traditional Yoruba women are usually petty traders who sometimes follow their husbands to the farm during crop harvesting periods. Whatever their income from petty trading, as housewives they rely on their husbands for the sustenance of the family and any husband who could not or deliberately refused to meet his fatherly responsibilities to his family was assumed to be lax, irresponsible and looked down upon by his wife and children as well as the society. Two, inability or willful refusal of a husband to meet his responsibilities to his family might encourage unhealthy relationship between his wife and another man who could turned out to be more sensitive and caring. Many Yoruba women, most especially those who marry to polygynists, usually have men friends that are traditionally referred to as “*oluku*” or popularly known as “*ale*” both meaning “concubine”. The above song becomes relevant when a wife intends to show that she is not receiving adequate care from the husband even when she does not have a concubine. But at least she would have used her tongue to signal a threat. According to a Chinese saying: “a woman’s tongue is her sword, and she does not let it rust”. (Source?)

The reaction of the supposedly uncaring husband to the abusive proverbial song of his wife is also very interesting.

(Reaction) Sakara: *Lojo o ba f'ale re han oko o (iyawo)*
Lojo o ba f'ale re han oko
Igbati, Igbaju lo o je sun o
Lojo o ba f'ale re han oko

Meaning The day you dare show your concubine to your husband (you wife)

The day you dare show your concubine to your husband
 You will be thoroughly beaten
 The day you dare show your concubine to your husband

Here the husband comes out with a warning threatening his wife with physical abuse and assault if she is found out to be dating another man. This song shows the firm authority of a man over his wife, which is most of the time, is encouraged by a male chauvinistic Yoruba traditional society.. This proverbial song also implies generally that it is not good to go beyond ones' limit. The song further reveals how nasty Yoruba men could be when they discover that their wives are involved in extra-marital affairs. . In the past wife battering was also justified by an old Italian proverb "women, asses, and nuts require rough hands". (Source?) This could also be corroborated with a Latin proverb that translates to "a spaniel, a woman, and a walnut tree, the more they're beaten the better they be" (Kelly 2002:2). The traditional marriage institution in Yorubaland wills such unending authority to men over their spouses. Another twin set of proverbial songs that are closely related to those analysed above as used in *Sokoro* are as follows:

(Action): Sokoro: *No w'oluranlowo,
 Emi o w'oluranlowo o,
 B'oko mi ko, b'oko mi ko ti o gberu mi
 No w'oluranlowo*

Meaning I shall look for another helper
 I shall look for another helper
 If my husband refuses to cater for my needs
 I shall look for another helper

This song is used to warn uncaring husbands who could not meet their responsibilities to their wives of possible unpalatable reaction that may come from their wives. Looking for another helper in the song also connotes having a concubine as explained earlier on. This corroborates a Yoruba saying that "*ati gbeyawo ko lejo ati gbo bukata loju*" meaning "marrying a wife is easy, the real challenge is to feed her ". According to what a French lady told her son every man must "remember that in wedded life there is only one thing which continues every day and that is the necessity of making the pot boil" (Kelly 2002:19). As usual the reaction of the husband to this threat is to issue his own counter threat.

(Reaction): Sakara: *Emi a gbe Yoyo wole*
Emi a gbe Yoyo wale o
B'aya mi ko, b'aya mi ko ti o gbo temi
Emi a gbe Yoyo wole

Meaning: I shall marry a prettier lady
 I shall marry a prettier lady
 If my wife continues to disobey me
 I shall marry a prettier lady

In this particular dialogue, the husband's reaction is to call the bluff of the wife about getting another helper whenever the husband fails in his responsibilities towards her. Retaliatory offensive proverbial songs and the issuance of threats between the husband and his wife is in line with a Yoruba proverb that says "*eniti o ba soko si orule ni yoo gbohun onile*" meaning "he who throws stones on the roof will hear the voice of the house owner". This proverb is akin to another one which says "he who brings home ant-ridden faggots must be ready for the visit of lizards (Kehinde 2004: 126). Again, the predominant authority attached to masculinity in Yoruba society restrained women after marriage from moving freely with any man other than their husbands and or the relatives, even with the relatives there are limitations. It is important to note that Any of the songs in this dialogue could come first as the "action" and the other becomes the "reaction".

The seemingly insatiable appetite of men to have sex with as many women as possible is clearly depicted in the Yoruba proverbial song below.

(Action): Sokoro: *Eesan l'okunrin yoo ma ran ka ni*
Eesan l'okunrin yoo ma ran ka ni
Bojule se mejo ko sa ma ran ka'le
Eesan l'okunrin yoo ma ran ka ni

Meaning: Men are winkles that crawl about
 Men are winkles that crawl about
 Even if there are eight houses, he will still crawl into all

 Men are winkles that crawl about

The expression in this song is symbolic. It portrays men as unsteady and sometimes unpredictable when it comes to sexual and marital issues. As pointed out earlier, Yoruba tradition allows a man to marry more than one wife and this most of the time does not go down well with their women counterpart. This song is an expression of lack of trust,

Meaning:

A woman that is bad in her husband's house cannot be good in her son's; she will become a rival to her son's wife

This proverb reflects on character. A good or bad character is not always hidden. If it is, it is just for a moment. Pretence ends where habitual character begins. This proverb portrays women as jealous though this is partly true; the tendency is not limited to women. The proverb is used here to charge wives on the need to be good ambassadors of their family anywhere they found themselves.

Isense ti o fi de ihin kii kuro lara pansaga obinrin

Meaning:

The saying "your mannerism brought you here" will always be a stigma on a promiscuous woman

A woman who is not contented with realities of life is bound to move from one husband to another. This may later become a stigma that will be used to deride such a woman even in the public. In the context of this paper it is used to detest the practices of divorce.

Bi a ba maa gb'omo rere jo, iyawo rere laa koko gbe jo

Meaning:

Dancing with a good wife is a precondition for dancing with a good child"

Good wives are pointers to good children and good families. Good family begets good living. Love and hatred are contagious. The honesty and love shown by a woman to her husband are usually reciprocated on their children. The proverb is used here to encourage women to be of good manner to their husband so that their children can find the favour of their husbands.

Conclusion

The foregoing analyses of the selected proverbs in Oladapo's album titled "Sokoro" has shown that the use of proverbs in music or other verbal arts does not only illustrate power in the tongues of those who are versed in the use and interpretation of proverbs but also serves as a didactic tool for teaching the norms and ethics in traditional Yoruba society. Didacticism and moral intentions run through the lyrics used in *Sokoro*. Oladapo's creativity and dynamism in using *ewi* to teach and impart moral lessons based on concepts from Yoruba traditions and language is clearly shown in this work. His ingenuity in employing proverbs to propagate traditional virtues and condemnation of societal vices was also ultimately displayed. This corroborates Olatunde's (1984) submission that African proverbs are like a social charter used to praise what the society considers to be virtues and to condemn bad practices.

Sokoro is a dramatic dimension of a dialogic use of proverbs where a reaction is given as commensurate to an action. The piece also provides a template for the classification of proverbs based on gender construct. The sources for the proverbial songs used in *Sokoro* are actually that of human behaviour in and around the environment they found themselves. These proverbs are used in such a way that a kind of reality which may be impossible through the use of mere spoken words, which Finnegan (1970) describes as making a point with extra forcefulness, was captured. Also noticed in the presentation is the use of a combination of verbal interjection and singing to drive home the gist of the dialogue. This makes the use of proverbs in the piece not only interesting but more stimulating than the mere conventional chant of the Yoruba *ewi* genre.

It is convenient to conclude this discussion by asserting that although efforts have been made in the areas of documentation, interpretation, representation and contextualization of Yoruba proverbs, much is still required in the area of gender classifications of these proverbs and their cultural implications. It is established in this paper that gender bias in the rendition of offensive Yoruba proverbial songs is a reality and that both sexes engage in it. For scholars in proverbs and gender studies such proverbial songs may become research materials for further studies on gender and culture in Africa.

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